

June 16, 2021

Dr. Lesli Myers-Small, RCSD Superintendent
Van White, RCSD Board President
Cynthia Elliott, RCSD Board Vice President
Ricardo Adams, RCSD Commissioner
William Clark, RCSD Commissioner
Beatriz LeBron, RCSD Commissioner
Amy Maloy, RCSD Commissioner
Willa Powell, RCSD Commissioner

Dear Commissioners and Superintendent,

Parents, students, community members, and educators have fought for decades to secure equitable school funding for Rochester's schools. Now we have a once in a lifetime opportunity to meet the needs of the Rochester City School District's (RCSD) students. We will accomplish this through much needed investments in our education system and structural changes to make those investments sustainable.

The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) includes \$196.5M in direct aid to RCSD. That money must be spent over the next 3 to 4 school years, and you are required to post a plan on your website with community feedback by July 1st, 2021. This letter includes recommendations for that plan, as well as recommendations for the \$87.5M in Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA) aid and tens of millions in additional Foundation Aid that is committed to be phased-in over the next two school years.

The pandemic has left tens of thousands of students with inadequate academic, physical, occupational, nutritional, and social-emotional support for months. With hundreds of millions of dollars coming to RCSD we have the resources to respond to this crisis and address many of the long-standing challenges RCSD has faced from chronic underfunding.

Our recovery must be inclusive and prioritize the voices of students and parents, while ensuring that resources remain within the community to the greatest extent possible. The following recommendations were developed in collaboration with parents, students, school staff, and community members, and approved by the undersigned.

The recommendations address 14 areas that are critical for using the funds to support students in a comprehensive and strategic way.

1. *Community Decides How Stimulus Money is Spent*

- a. RCSD must commit to a **long-term planning process** with the school community to develop a list of recommendations for the stimulus money and increases in Foundation Aid in the 2022-23 school year and thereafter.

- b. These recommendations should then be voted on through *a participatory budget process* that gives added weight to the most directly affected by school spending (students and parents).

2. Financial Transparency

Prioritize the development of an on-line financial dashboard (updated monthly) that supports families and stakeholders to understand how money is spent, including the federal stimulus. Such a dashboard should track money that flows into and out of the community; and key metrics on the impact of the federal stimulus, developed in partnership with parents, students, and staff.

3. Invest in Structures to Support Parent and Student Voice

- a. Create paid positions for parents to work within buildings and provide services to students.
- b. A hotline for parents and students that have questions or needs related to COVID-19 and the constantly changing policies and practices.

4. Support Students With Disabilities (\$20M)

- a. Fully fund the recommendations of the Special Education Advisory Council so that special education and related services are brought into legal compliance.
- b. Consistent mandatory professional development for all staff on students IEPs, implicit bias, the asset model approach, Other Health Impairment (OHI) classifications, and the Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS) that will address the over classification of students, particularly students of color, and non-compliance with IEPs.
- c. Align the continuum of special education services across buildings for fewer student transitions, more program availability, and adherence to least restrictive environments.
- d. Strengthen MTSS by investing in universal language supports in K-3 like the discontinued Foundations Program that reduces special education classifications and expenses in the long run.

5. Support Multilingual Learning and Promote Multilingualism (\$10M)

- a. Increase multilingual professional development for all instructional staff including techniques for scaffolding language acquisition. Increase course offerings and multilingual materials that will promote the value of multiculturalism and increase the number of multilingual diplomas. (\$3M)
- b. Make a one-time investment in translation equipment (headsets and transmitters) and translate all routine documents and forms into every language spoken by caregivers of RCSD students. (\$150K)

- c. Increase engagement of refugee families with dedicated staff to support parent engagement from non-English speaking families.
- d. Fully fund the recommendations of the New York State corrective action plan.
- e. Re-establish a newcomer pathway/program for non-refugee multilingual learners.
- f. Align continuum of multilingual services including bilingual programming for fewer student transitions, and more program availability/equity.

6. Address Low Academic Achievement (\$39.5M or more)

- a. Hire more school counselors to check in on every child enrolled at RCSD to assess what additional academic and social-emotional supports they may need as a result of the pandemic.
- b. Hire an independent consultant to take an inventory of successful programs and schools throughout RCSD, and intentionally increase slots in those programs and schools to expand their impact.
- c. Hire more teaching assistants to lower student to teacher ratios where necessary.
- d. Create a plan in consultation with parents and students to increase instructional time. Use at a minimum the 20% (\$39.5M) in ARPA funds to create targeted tutoring programs and an extended school year and/or school day, including summer and afterschool programs. Partner with effective community based agencies to administer these programs.
- e. Collaborate and coordinate with the local out-of-school time intermediary, GRASSA, to create a sustainable coordinated learning system of summer and after-school programming opportunities.
- f. Increase funding for evidence-based reading programs in K-3.
- g. Expand the number of slots in advanced courses and create an equitable process by which students are identified and can enroll in advanced coursework.
- h. Improve access to college level instruction by expanding the number of AP sections offered, investing in professional learning for AP educators, and expanding dual enrollment course offerings with local colleges.
- i. Develop a long-term concrete plan for summer school (enrichment as well as legal mandates) that addresses both the short-term needs of students after the pandemic and a sustainable model to provide summer enrichment opportunities for all students who want them.

7. Address Declining Enrollment Through Added Supports, Ending the School-to-Prison Pipeline, and Better Transitions

- a. Develop and implement a plan for reducing the number of buildings to redistribute resources to the remaining buildings.
- b. Invest in early grade reading and social-emotional supports to have students engaged and reading by third grade; this will make elementary schools competitive with charter schools and other alternative education settings to RCSD.
- c. Explore piloting evidence-based socioeconomically and racially diverse inter-district magnet schools offering unique curriculum and programmatic themes not otherwise available in any Monroe County school district.
- d. Develop and fund a formal transition strategy between preschool and kindergarten that includes professional development for K teachers on transition needs and play-based curricula, purchasing classroom materials to support play-based instruction, and expanded family outreach and orientation programs.
- e. Invest additional resources into 7th and 9th grade academic and social-emotional supports to improve transitions for incoming high school students, improve graduation rates, and make RCSD high schools more attractive to parents which will improve enrollment.

8. Equity Across Buildings and Program Alignment

- a. Calculate school funding based on student need (ie. SPED, ELL) to ensure equitable distribution of funding. Advancing equity should be done without dismantling successful programs that currently exist.
- b. Improve transitions between buildings, grade levels, and programs, especially the transition from Preschool to Kindergarten.
- c. Reform the managed choice policy to ensure student placements are equitable, siblings are able to stay together, and neighborhood schooling is a viable option. Include Pre-K in the district's deliberation about revising placement policies and the existing three zone structure.
- d. Balance special education and multilingual enrollment across buildings to the greatest extent possible.

9. School Climate, Students' Mental Health, and Trauma (\$20M for 2021-22)

- a. \$30M investment in restorative practices over 4 years, **\$10M in 2021-22**, \$10M in 2022-23, \$5M in 2023-24, \$5M in 2024-25 (ARPA Timeline)
 - i. Hire 20 restorative coaches for the next 3 years up from current 6.
 - ii. Provide professional development to all staff on restorative and trauma-informed practices, and stipends for building level staff to run circles and coordinate restorative work in their buildings.

- iii. Include restorative practices as part of the mandatory professional development all staff receive.
 - iv. Stipends for parents and students to run circles and promote restorative practices.
 - b. \$5M every year for help zones and alternative to suspensions in every building.
 - c. \$5M in additional mental health supports for students including more social workers and counselors.
 - i. Include non-traditional mental health supports such as art and music therapy.
 - ii. Provide outlets to relieve stress through yoga, dance, drama and art.
 - iii. Start each day with circles for young-people to talk about what they are going through.

10. Nutritional and Tasty Meals (\$8M)

- a. \$8M in additional investments, \$5M for capital improvements, \$3M for food sourcing and quality in order to:
 - i. Make more meals from scratch.
 - ii. Culturally relevant meal options.
 - iii. Procure more fresh local produce.
 - iv. Invest in salad bars and flavor stations in every school.
 - v. Work with students and parents to develop meal ideas, and include parents in food preparation wherever possible.
 - vi. Every school building should have a food pantry overseen by a community school site coordinator.

11. Recruit and Retain More Teachers of Color (\$3M)

- a. \$3M fund to expand the Teaching & Learning Institute beyond East High School.
- b. Tuition reimbursement for staff of color pursuing their teaching certification.

12. Culturally Responsive Sustaining-Education Framework (\$3M)

- a. More course offerings.
- b. Recruit teachers to teach culturally relevant curriculum.
- c. Counselors to promote more diverse course options to students.

- d. All new text book purchases should be evaluated for cultural responsiveness, relevance, and anti-racist pedagogy.

13. More Support for Families Through the Community Schools Model (\$5M)

- a. Dedicated funding for a community school site coordinator at every building. Site coordinators are not required to be administrators, or be required to take on administrative duties in addition to their site coordinator responsibilities.
- b. Determine one-time purchases at each school building by reviewing needs assessments that identify equipment, materials, and infrastructure that are lacking.
- c. Startup funds for school-specific and community-wide pilot programs, culturally-relevant curriculum development and new or reconfigured schools, and to address issues – such as infrastructure, expansion of broadband and related technological access to all students.
- d. Leverage additional funding streams in the ARPA to support families with housing/rental assistance, child care, food, internet access and devices, mental health support, and other health care needs.
- e. Identify areas for efficiency in contracting and consent sharing agreements internally with RCSD legal and accountability and implement expedited/streamlined contracting and joint data sharing processes and agreements with community partners, families and the community school.

14. Support for High School Seniors with Postsecondary Transitions

- a. Hire adequate staffing for all high school seniors to have access to high-quality postsecondary transition planning, especially students who require 504 plans.
- b. Hire sufficient numbers of school counselors and other school employees that can help graduating seniors complete postsecondary applications in the fall; financial aid applications (TAP, FAFSA, etc.); and health, housing, and other forms required to stay on track.

These recommendations are comprehensive and far reaching because they are what students, parents, staff, and the entire school community deserve. We will be scrutinizing the plan posted on July 1st, 2021 to see how each and every recommendation is addressed. We are counting on you to seize this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Rochester's children.

Sincerely,

Bilingual Education Council

Parent Leadership Advisory Council

Special Education Parent Advisory Council

Teen Empowerment

Teens With Attitude

Action for Education Equity

Action for a Better Community

Alliance for Quality Education

Citizen Action of New York, Rochester Chapter

Greater Rochester After-School and Summer Alliance

Great Schools 4 All

IBERO American Action League

The Children's Agenda

The Education Trust, New York

Urban League of Rochester